



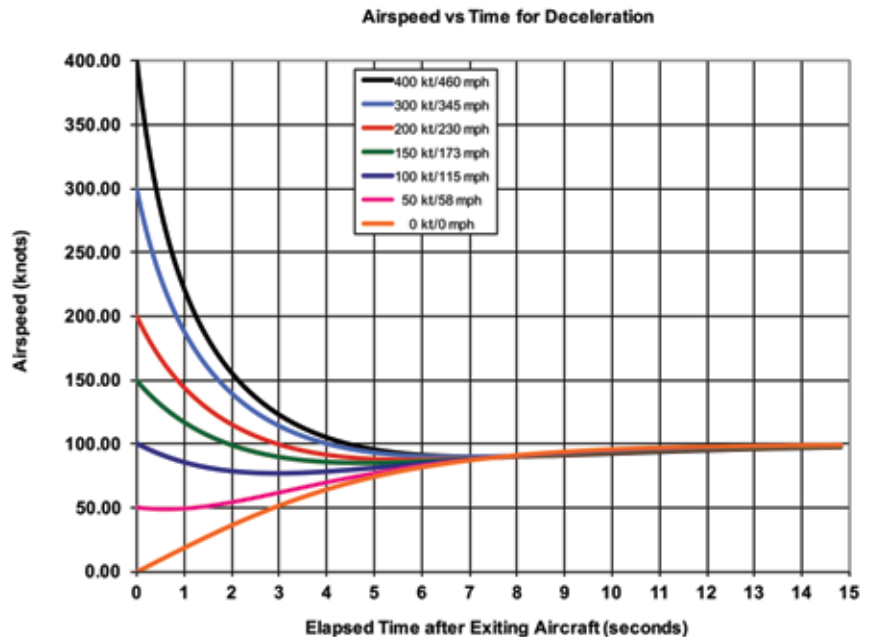
Are You Really Safe?

Staying knowledgeable

ARE YOU REALLY SAFE? Or are you just kidding yourself? The third-class medical issue has been a major concern for pilots, and now we can all breathe a sigh of relief for all the hard work that has been done to reform that. We all know that each year we have to get an annual on our aircraft and must keep up with service bulletins, but how many of you actually take a close look at your other safety equipment — in this case, your parachute?

You may think wearing a parachute is an unnecessary evil, so you only put it on because you have to. You may think you are never going to need to use it or find out if it really works, so why worry about it? Just because the harness and container are dirty and look faded because you left them in the sun for hours on end is no reason to worry. Besides my rigger said, “The recommended 20-year service life by manufacturers is not the law, and my parachute rigger can tell if it’s airworthy.” *Don’t worry, be happy!*

If that’s your thinking and practice, have I got news for you. The weaknesses caused by UV, in particular, to your parachute canopy are impossible to see with the naked eye. Don’t forget the harness webbing is affected also. When I was chairman of the Parachute Industry Association’s (PIA) Rigging Committee, we had quite a few heated discussions on the topic of UV damage and the life expectancy of parachutes. After the smoke had cleared and the evidence was reviewed, the parachute industry felt that a 20-year service life was a very good idea, and that’s what the Technical and Rigging committees recommended be adopted by the general membership and the Executive Committee of PIA. That was more than 10 years ago, if my math is correct, and it was a good decision. However, there are many people today who still feel this standard is a plot by the manufacturers to keep



you buying new equipment. Twenty years is a long time to keep any piece of equipment in service, even if it’s a piece of equipment you hope you never have to use. Tell that to the people who didn’t feel there was a need to put more lifeboats on the Titanic, or to those pilots who didn’t have enough altitude below them when it hit the fan or iceberg.

What I would like to see each of you do is to be proactive and contact the manufacturer, or a rigger the manufacturer recommends, and have your parachute thoroughly inspected. Who better knows your life preserver — eh — your parachute? I don’t mean this should be done at every repack. If you have an older parachute showing wear and tear — that is, say, 10-plus years old and it has been in service, quietly waiting to save your life — having it inspected is a good idea. Doing so gives the manufacturer an opportunity to make sure any updates have been complied with and your parachute is truly airworthy. It can also give you peace of mind to know that your rigger is doing a fine job.

In my last column I discussed how a parachute is

tested and I purposely tried to keep it simple. Later I was reminded by one of the manufacturers of pilot emergency parachutes that there are many categories for testing parachutes.

Manly Butler, from Butler Parachute Systems, wrote me an e-mail reminding me that all parachutes are not created equal, and he is correct. For those of you who are interested in finding out more about the various categories for which manufacturers can have their parachutes certified, I suggest you go to each manufacturer's website. They have a lot of useful information. For example the requirements for which most parachutes are tested fall under TSO C23(b), (c), or (d). TSO stands for technical standard order, and they are the standards issued by the FAA. The requirements for each TSO vary depending on what the manufacturer is trying to achieve for its product. Some TSO certification tests may require higher test-drop speeds and more weight.

If you are one of the techno geeks interested in all the fine details, I urge you to look them up. For example, on Butler Parachute's home page, you can click on "Technical Data and Publications" to review the information. Other manufacturers have similar pages on their websites.

When you're purchasing a parachute, these standards can be very helpful in choosing the correct parachute. For instance, do you really need a parachute designed for an ejection seat or a very high-speed aircraft when you're flying a glider or an aerobatic aircraft that's not flying at Mach 1? Typically those parachutes are costlier, but are they any safer for your needs?

The chart at left shows you how fast you'll slow down if you ever have to bail out. You'll slow to a safe opening speed, in most cases, within two seconds. The only difference between bailing out at 400 knots or 150 knots are the effects upon your body. Will all your body parts be where they should be, and will most of your clothes remain on you? Remember to wear clean underwear.

Personally, I would rather put the extra money I would save buying the right parachute for my needs into another tow for my glider or more fuel. Remember that the placards on every parachute tell you what it is rated at, and that they all have a significant built-in safety factor far exceeding those on the placard. Remember: Bigger is not always better.

With the proper equipment and enough altitude below, you'll live to fly another day. In case you didn't know ... above ground level is much more important than mean sea level when making a parachute jump. Please remember to practice, practice, practice your emergency procedures before and after each flight.

The decision to fly safely begins long before you strap into your aircraft.

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